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Russian Military and Security Forces: A Postulated Reaction to a Nuclear Detonation

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In this paper, we will examine how Russia's military and security forces might react to the detonation of a 10-kiloton nuclear weapon placed next to the walls surrounding the Kremlin. At the time of this "big bang," Putin is situated outside Moscow and survives the explosion. No one claims responsibility for the detonation. No other information is known.

Numerous variables will determine how events ultimately unfold and how the military and security forces will respond. Prior to examining these variables in greater detail, it is imperative to elucidate first what we mean by Russia's military and security forces.

Military and Security Forces

Most laymen tend to think of the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the Federal Security Service (FSB) as constituting Russia's military and security forces. In fact, the number of Russia's "power structures" (*siloviki*)—armed formations that have a military structure and command troops—has varied during the post-Soviet period ranging from twelve to twenty eight.

Article six of the federal Law on Combating Terrorism lists the following organizations (in order) as having direct responsibility in the fight against terrorism: the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), the Federal Protection Service (FSO), the Ministry of Defense (MOD), and the FSB Border Troops.¹ Men in uniform serve in all of these organizations.

The FSB appears to coordinate the overall effort in the fight against terrorism. And, of course, the Moscow region is home to numerous MOD forces. Beyond these organizations, numerous ministries and departments are available to participate in the battle against terrorism, such as the Ministry for Civil Defense, Emergencies, and Natural Disasters (MChS), the Federal Agency for Atomic Energy (Rosatom, formerly known as the Ministry of Atomic Energy), Mintrans (Ministry of Transportation), and the Ministry of Railways (MPS). We will briefly discuss the main military and security forces that would play a role in the event of a nuclear detonation.

Federal Security Service

The FSB, the domestic successor to the Soviet KGB, is Russia's principal counter-intelligence organization. It is also the lead agency coordinating the fight against terrorism in Russia. Its agents and informants are spread throughout Russia. The head of the FSB answers directly to the President. The FSB's Counter Terrorism Department [the 2nd Department] has responsibility for countering terrorist operations and has set up regional special operations departments to deal with terrorism in at least eleven Russian cities.² In 1995, the Alpha anti-terrorist unit—which had previously been part of the KGB—was transferred from the Main Protection Directorate of the Presidential security service to the FSB.³ The elite Alpha and Vypel Spetsnaz troops are located in Moscow;

² CJ Dick, "If Democracy Fails in Russia: Armed Force and Political Power," Occasional Brief 49.

³ "FSB Reorganized and Strengthened Under new Head Barsukov," FBIS, 3 January 1996.

thwarting terrorism is their primary task.⁴ In addition, the FSB continues to have special departments (*osobyie otdely*) in the military just as the KGB did in Soviet times.⁵

The Ministry of Internal Affairs

The primary mission of the MVD is to ensure security within Russia's borders. The MVD has no equivalent counterpart in the U.S.; it combines many of the functions of the FBI, the Drug Enforcement Agency, and the National Guard. Departments under its jurisdiction include the Public Order Department, which oversees the police and traffic control, the special purpose police (OMON) responsible for riot control, the Main Criminal Investigative Department responsible for organized crime and drug trafficking, Fire and Forestry Rescue Operations, and the Internal Troops (*vnutrennyye voiska*). It is important not to conflate the MVD Internal Troops with the MVD in general because the Internal Troops are a military organization, whereas the other elements of the MVD are not.⁶

The Internal Troops of the MVD consist of roughly 260,000 soldiers. Of those, approximately 20-25% are used for operations, 30% guard key sites, and the remainder are engaged in administrative duties, maintenance, and logistics. The Internal Troops are responsible for point defense of important facilities in Russia as well as convoy security. The Internal Troops have primary responsibility for the protection of Russia's nuclear installations as well as the transportation of nuclear materials (trains carrying nuclear warheads are guarded by MOD troops). The Internal Troops led the invasion into Chechnia in 1995. They constituted the bulk of the forces until heavy resistance required Russia to turn to the regular army.⁷

The Border Troops (of the FSB)

Still regarded as one of the most important military organizations in Russia, the Federal Border Service (FPS), commonly referred to as the border troops or border guards, was resubordinated under the FSB in early 2003. The FPS guards were one of the three main armed forces of the Soviet Union, the other two being the Ministry of Defense and the Internal Troops of the MVD.

Today, the Border Troops continue to protect the borders, but also have a greater commercial mandate than their Soviet predecessor. The purpose of the border troops is no longer to keep citizens in, but to regulate commerce, prevent smuggling and illegal immigration, safeguard borders from incursions, and protect Russian interests in the near abroad. The Border Troops work closely with Russian Customs. Officials from both

⁴ Roman Ukolov, "The Russian FSB is Not the USSR KGB," *Segodnia*, 21 June 1999.

⁵ Guy Chazan, "Putin Tightens His Grip on Russia's Armed Forces," *Wall Street Journal*, 16 February 2000

⁶ The militia and other departments of the MVD would also play an important role in trying to restore order after a big bang event, however, in terms of the question we are examining, specifically how would the military forces respond, the MVD Internal Troops are the focus of our analysis.

⁷ Mark Galeotti, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, February 1997; Mark Galeotti, *Jane's Intelligence Review*, June 1997

organizations are located at most major border checkpoints: air, sea and land (including road, rail and pedestrian crossings).

In the event that a nuclear weapon is detonated, the Border Troops will likely seal the borders and conduct lengthy inspections of all vehicles in search of both the perpetrators and any additional nuclear weapons that they believe may be in the process of being smuggled out of Russia.

Russian Customs Committee

Russian Customs is responsible for preventing the illicit trafficking of nuclear weapons and material across the Russian border. Russian Customs signed a protocol with the U.S. Department of Energy in June 1998 stating its intention to cooperate in: 1) the search, detection, and identification of nuclear and nuclear-related materials; 2) development of response procedures and capabilities; 3) deterrence of future illicit trafficking in nuclear and nuclear-related materials.

Ministry of Emergency Situations

The Ministry of Emergency Situations (MChS) is both a civil defense and emergency relief organization, similar to the role FEMA plays in the U.S. The head of MChS, Sergei Shoigu, is one of the longest serving Ministers in the Russian Federation having assumed responsibility of the organization since its creation. He evidently enjoyed the confidence of Boris Yeltsin who replaced government officials at an unprecedented rate. Shoigu also appears to enjoy the confidence of Putin who expanded Shoigu's responsibilities. For our purposes, it is sufficient to know that Shoigu's organization is responsible for relocation of citizens in the events of a national disaster.⁸ In the event of a big bang, the MChS will be out in full force.

The Scenario: Adding More Context

Should a nuclear detonation occur in the center of downtown Moscow, absolutely chaos will ensue. Communication links will be destroyed, thousands of dead and wounded bodies will be strewn about (this does not include those that are instantly incinerated). Much of the leadership will be decapitated. The memorable scene wherein Mayor Rudy Guilliano calmly walked away from the wreckage of the World Trade Center on September 11, 1991 and encouraged other New Yorkers to remain calm and walk in his direction will not be played out. Concern about the contamination effects of nuclear fallout will cause utter panic among the citizens. They will not remain calm.

Military and Security Tasks

The various military and security structures described above will be called in to: 1) assist the victims; 2) help restore order; 3) catch the perpetrators; 4) protect both the

⁸ Itar-Tass, 13 January 2000, FBIS.

(remaining) leadership and important facilities across the country out of fear that subsequent detonations may occur.⁹

Unfortunately, unless a well-rehearsed military plan is already in place that takes into account who will survive the carnage, the military and security services are likely to botch the four tasks listed above. The primary reason is the almost complete lack of coordination among the various power ministries and organizations responsible for security in Russia, a feat so amply displayed in Chechnia and the hostage crisis at the school in Beslan. Thus, while a strictly coordinated recovery effort might be too much to ask in a big bang scenario, the U.S. should expect an even less coordinated recovery effort than one might expect under such circumstances. This failure to properly coordinate would extend to the various military districts located far from the Kremlin.

Lack of Coordination Among the Power Structures

Early in his Presidency, Putin sought to integrate the many power structures—from law enforcement to the military—by administratively amalgamating Russia's 89 regions (*sub''ekty*) into seven super regions that corresponded to the seven districts of the MVD's Internal Troops. The other power structures (with the exception of the FSB) were to reconfigure their organizational structures along these seven regions, each of which was headed by a presidential plenipotentiary.¹⁰ As part of this integration plan, the rear services of all the armed forces would be integrated, thereby eliminating duplication and waste.

As with the majority of military reform efforts undertaken by the Russian government, this plan was an utter failure. Once it became clear that the Presidential envoys had no control over resources other than the small budgets used to set up and staff their offices, the various power services proceeded to ignore them. The MVD disrupted efforts to integrate the rear services while the military leadership moved forward with its plan to merge the Volga and Urals Military Districts. In so doing, the military organized itself along six districts paying no heed to Putin's seven-region plan.

Given this background, let us briefly delve into other key variables that will affect the behavior of the military and security forces.

Perception of Who Detonated the Weapon?

The Russian government views terrorism, organized crime, and "the drug mafia" as the major domestic threats to the state's security.¹¹ The Soviet Union experienced few acts of terrorism because of the ubiquitous police surveillance. The recent acts of terrorism in Russia (beginning with the bombing of several Moscow apartment buildings in the fall of

⁹ Many military lives will also be sacrificed in the clean-up effort, but we do not address that topic in this paper.

¹⁰ Pavel K. Baev, "The Trajectory of the Russian Military: Downsizing, Degeneration, and Defeat," in Steven E. Miller and Dmitri Trenin, eds., *The Russian Military* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences and MIT Press, 2004).

¹¹ Aleksandr Sadchikov, "Counterterrorism Efforts Are Being Stepped Up in Southern Russian," *Izvestia*, 1 August 2004. See also the 2000 National Security Concept.

1999) undermined that sense of security among the people, and the Russia government has taken steps to thwart terrorism by passing antiterrorism legislation as well as beefing up security in major cities and around some important facilities. The agency that would “take the lead” in responding to this heinous act will depend on who the military and security forces as well as the political leadership believe committed the crime. If it’s believed to be an act of terrorism, the FSB will have the lead role. The military will surely be involved in the recovery effort as well the effort to locate the perpetrators, but they will not have the lead role. On the other hand, if the political and military leadership believe that the act was committed by the United States or another nuclear power, then the military will have the lead in responding. (All the other security forces will be involved in both scenarios.)

How Much of the Leadership is Decapitated?

The location of the Ministry of Defense and the FSB headquarters is sufficiently close to the Kremlin that if a big bang occurred, and if the Minister of Defense and head of the FSB were in their respective headquarters buildings or in the vicinity, they along with much of their respective organizations’ upper echelons would be killed.

There is no doubt that Putin would have turned to these two trusted friends (they hold their positions because of their personal relationship to Putin) immediately. If they are killed and if much of the leadership of their organizations is decapitated, the question is raised as to who will be in charge. As discussed above, each of the military and security organizations have district heads throughout Russia. But, who will issue the commands. For instance, which of the Border Troop districts will send out the alert to all districts to either close the borders or conduct careful checks of all vehicles, trains, and so on. Similarly, if Shoigu is killed in Moscow, is there a plan in place delineating who the next person in charge will be? I would like to think the Russians have thought about this and have contingency plans. It would appear that the USG had not thought this through adequately prior to September 11, 2001. If you recall, the press reported some new hideout where members of congress as well as the White House leadership take turns visiting, to ensure that there is not a complete decapitation of the US leadership.

Will the Russian military blame the U.S. responsible for the detonation?

Some of the surviving military leadership will certainly ask whether the U.S. was responsible for the detonation. The reasoning would be that a detonation near the Kremlin could be a means of decapitating the leadership in preparation for additional strikes. A nuclear detonation will likely knock out most communication links and it would be some time before the political leadership could learn that no incoming missile or bomber was detected. Such information about the means of delivery would not fully eliminate suspicions about U.S. involvement, but it would raise questions possibly leading to alternative explanations.

Terrorism looms large on the radar screens of the military and security forces. Given the large number of terrorist attacks in Russia over the past few years, logic

would dictate that the military and security forces first explore the possibility that a terrorist organization was responsible. However, that would require accepting responsibility for the security transgression. Rather than accept its own incompetence, as in the sinking of the Kursk submarine, the instinctual response is to blame the U.S.

Putin, however, will be level-headed and will explore all possibilities recognizing that terrorists are most likely the culprits. If he is able to give some kind of press conference early on, he may pay lip-service to theories of western hegemony. However, he would (or should) be careful not to exacerbate tensions with the West. He may or may not realize that if the U.S. was not the culprit, U.S. forces will move to heightened alert fearing that they are the next target.

The U.S. will be in a difficult position. On the one hand, they would not want to move to a heightened alert posture so as to dampen Moscow's fears that the U.S. is preparing for a second strike. On the other hand, it will be difficult for the U.S. not to elevate the homeland security warning system. If the possibility of misinterpreting U.S. military and homeland defense maneuvers has not been raised between the U.S. and Russian command centers, it surely should be raised. And, of course, the converse must also be discussed, specifically, if a nuclear bomb is detonated in the U.S., Russia must prepare ahead of time for its response. The U.S. could misconstrue Russia's military preparations and believe it is preparing for a second strike.

Putin's response will also be conditioned by current world events. If a big bang occurred precisely when international relations or relations between Russia and the U.S. are tense, Putin may read more into the big bang than the U.S. would hope. Bad timing could lead to an unwelcome interpretation on the part of Moscow.

Moreover, while I have focused on Russian-U.S. interactions, Putin could also perceive the big bang as having emanated from China in its territorial bid for land in the Far East.

It is worth noting that the Russian National Command Authority consists of the President, the Minister of Defense and the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces.¹² If the Kazbek conference communications system were destroyed by the blast, it is unclear whether the anyone in the National Command Authority would be able to use their nuclear suitcase (*cheget*) terminals that hook up to the Kazbek system.¹³ Presumably, there is sufficient redundancy built into such a system that it would survive a nuclear blast. But, that is another unknown.

¹² Sergey Ishchenko, "Travels of a "Nuclear Button." Only Three Such Suitcases in Our Country," *Moscow Trud*, April 2003.

¹³ Sergey Ishchenko, "Travels of a "Nuclear Button." Only Three Such Suitcases in Our Country," *Moscow Trud*, April 2003.

Will the Military Stage a Coup?

Every organization has a few renegades whose behavior is outside the normal bell curve of most others in the organization. Not taking into consideration these few renegades, I would argue the likelihood that military will stage a coup is quite low. First, there is no motive for them to take over. In the first hours after the blast, when communications are destroyed, someone in the military leadership may declare marshal law. Once Putin is able to contact the military leadership—whether in Moscow or at a designated military leadership post located in another part of the country—the military will take their orders from him. (If the former Chief of the General Staff, Anatolii Kvashnin had remained in power and survived the blast, an internal struggle within the military could ensue, but not viv-a-vis ruling the country, but rather over who controlled the military as Kvashnin would consider Russia on a war-time footing.)

Conclusion

Without knowing the kind of preparation the Russian military and security forces have already undertaken to prepare for a big bang scenario, I would offer the following recommendations: 1) take steps to ensure that a key part of the military and security forces' leadership survives; 2) Exercise different command scenarios varying the type of threat and who will lead the effort; 3) Conduct command exercises and assume that Putin does not survive; 4) Discuss contingency plans with the U.S. The problem here of course is that if you each side believes the other is capable of launching a retaliatory blow, then lack of signatures that a side is taking such steps is not necessarily a sign that they are not taking retaliatory steps.